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ABSTRACT

This ERIC Short Report attempts to summarize the main points of "Motivation Theory," as described by Drs. Edward L. Deci and Richard M. Ryan of the University of Rochester in their paper, "Curiosity and Self-Directed Learning: The Role of Motivation in Education." "Motivation theory" research explores reasons for school-age children losing their curiosity and enthusiasm for learning. The major ideas are summarized in five sections covering: (1) three types of behavioral motivation; (2) understanding of relationships between behavior and its consequences; (3) controlling and informational aspects of rewards and communications; (4) perceived links between behavior and external recognition in schools; and (5) how a supportive atmosphere for teachers can lead to a supportive atmosphere for students. (JW)

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THE ROLE OF MOTIVATION IN THE ELEMENTARY SCHOOL

ERIC/EECE Short Report-3

ERIC Clearinghouse on Elementary and Early Childhood Education

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The Role of Motivation in the Elementary School

MOST OBSERVERS AGREE that young children start out curious and adventuresome: they marvel at new discoveries, ask numerous questions, and experiment with things that interest them.

Many school-age children, however, seem to have lost their earlier enthusiasm; their learning seems to be motivated more by external directives, such as verbal recognition, grades, and gold stars. Why is this?

Drs. Edward L. Deci and Richard M. Ryan of the University of Rochester have attempted to provide some ways of looking at these apparent changes through what they term their "motivation theory," the main points of which are summarized here.*

Motivational Orientations

Deci and Ryan identify three main types of behavioral motivation–intrinsic, extrinsic, and amotivated–each of which directs an individual's behavior at different times.

Intrinsic: The way young children learn–through exploration and questioning–is generally characteristic of intrinsic motivation. For these children, the reward for an activity is the activity itself. Such learning aids children in mastering their environments and acting with self-determination.

Extrinsic: The learning behaviors of older children, who are often more externally directed, frequently reflects extrinsic motivation. This kind of learning is less likely to be marked by curiosity and interest and can be less than thorough (see, for example, Condry & Koslowski, 1979).

The attention of these children is generally focused more on the outcome of an activity rather than the activity itself. They work toward good grades, parental or teacher approval, and to meet deadlines.

Often, observe Deci and Ryan, extrinsically motivated children can be compliant–they depend on others for direction and affirmation–or rebellious, defiant, and disruptive in class. The latter type of children have been referred to in the literature as "reactant." When they think their freedom is threatened they react by doing the opposite of what they are asked.

Whether compliant or reactant, these children, according to Deci and Ryan, generally tend to lose control of the learning situation: rather than directing it themselves they are dependent on the directions of others.

Amotivated: The learning of amotivated children is generally slow and painful; the children tend to be passive and to act as though they are helpless.

These individuals tend not to perceive clear connections between their own behaviors and the outcomes of those behaviors. Consequently, they believe that outcomes are dictated by chance or fate and not by their own efforts. These children find it difficult to learn, they do not achieve, and frequently come to feel they are worthless.

Of the three types of motivational orientation, Deci and Ryan contend that intrinsic is the ideal type for it facilitates self-directed and competent learning. But how can the intrinsically motivated behavior so often evident in younger children be maintained and fostered to a greater extent in older children?

The Importance of Contingencies

First, Deci and Ryan argue that to be motivated individuals need to understand the relationship between behavior and its consequences. However, while research reveals that clearly perceiving contingencies between one's behavior and its outcomes may reduce amotivation and foster extrinsic motivation, it may undermine intrinsic motivation.

The reason for this appears to be that those contingencies most clearly perceived by people have tangible, external outcomes such as rewards, punishments, or negative feedback. While it might be expected that punishment or negative feedback would undermine intrinsic motivation, it seems surprising that rewards, which indicate to individuals that they are competent, do not always enhance intrinsic motivation.

Controlling and Informational Aspects

Deci and Ryan suggest that the answer lies in the nature of rewards and communications which they contend have either one of two aspects: controlling or informational.

Controlling: The function of this aspect is to bring about a particular behavioral outcome in one person which is desired by another (the rewarder or communicator). For example, telling children they will get candy *if* they clean their rooms would be to reward controllingly.

Informational: In contrast to this controlling usage of candy, giving children candy as a way of letting them know something they did was "great," would be to reward informationally. Here, the children are given information (through the candy) that is relevant to their own initiated performance.

*The full text of this paper, "Curiosity and Self Directed Learning: The Role of Motivation in Education," will be available on ERIC microfiche in March, 1982. It will also be available in spring 1982 in *Current Topics in Early Childhood Education, Vol IV*, Lilian Katz (Ed.), Norwood, NJ: Ablex Publishing Corp., 355 Chestnut Street, Norwood, NJ 07648.

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These two aspects of rewards and communications are essential to Deci and Ryan's motivation theory for they offer an explanation as to why rewards and communications, which are both cases of *positive* feedback, do not always foster intrinsic motivation. According to Deci and Ryan rewards and communications foster intrinsic motivation when a recipient "interprets" them as providing information about the competency of his or her performance, rather than as controlling that performance.

Deci and Ryan also note that the types of environments in which children grow up have important implications for their motivational orientations.

When they grow up in "Informational" environments they are more likely to internalize informational contingencies; in "controlling" environments they are more likely to internalize controlling contingencies. The former fosters intrinsic motivation and the latter extrinsic. Those environments in which children perceive no clear contingencies will foster amotivation, characterized by passivity.

Importance in the Schools

According to Deci and Ryan, contingencies between behaviors and outcomes are easily perceived in the schools, for much of children's behavior there is subject to external recognition in the form of rewards and other communications.

Deci and Ryan note, for example, that the school system is geared towards success–teachers are judged on the basis of the success of their students (the process of accountability). An outgrowth of this situation is the increasing move towards the use of standardized curricula and standardized evaluation of students, conditions which place controls on teacher and student alike and thus may undermine intrinsic motivation.

Further, teachers often have large classes of children of widely varying abilities–in such situations it is difficult not to be controlling. They may also have many children who come from controlling homes–a situation which again can undermine teachers' efforts to foster intrinsic motivation in their students.

Essentially, the intrinsic motivation of many teachers is undermined by such factors as deadlines, external evaluations, and constraints on what they might like to do in the classroom.

Support for Teachers

Deci and Ryan suggest that school administrators, and the community in general, need to be supportive of teachers' efforts to try new things, to respond to challenges, and to teach according to their preferred methods.

In other words, Deci and Ryan propose that if the climate of the educational system were more informational and autonomy-oriented in nature, this would foster teachers' intrinsic motivation for teaching. In turn, teachers would be better able to foster intrinsic motivation in their students.

RELATED ERIC DOCUMENTS

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